

Are today's teens putting the brakes on adulthood?

September 19 2017, by Amy Norton, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Parents may still marvel at how fast their kids grow up,

but a new study finds that U.S. teenagers are maturing more slowly than past generations.

In some ways, the trend appears positive: High school kids today are less likely to be drinking or having sex, versus their counterparts in the 1980s and 1990s.

But they are also less likely to go on dates, have a part-time job or drive—traditional milestones along the path to adulthood.

So is that slower development "good" or "bad"? It may depend on how you look at it, the researchers said.

According to "life history theory," neither fast nor slow development is inherently good or bad, said study author Jean Twenge.

Still, there are "trade-offs" to each path, explained Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University.

"The upside of slower development is that teens aren't growing up before they are ready," she said. "But the downside is, they go to college and into the workplace without as much experience with independence."

And that downside is clearly evident in the real world, according to one specialist in adolescent mental health.

"I think if you ask any college professor, they'll tell you students these days are woefully unprepared in basic life skills," said Yamalis Diaz.

Diaz, who was not involved in the study, is a clinical assistant professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at NYU Langone Medical Center, in New York City.

Today's students may be sharp academically, Diaz said—but they often have trouble with basics like planning, time management and problem-solving.

That's not to say teens should be rushing into adulthood, she stressed. The problem arises when kids have no experience with adult-like responsibilities, or spend little time navigating relationships with their peers.

"It's like going into the heavy lifting of adulthood without having exercised the necessary muscles," Diaz said.

The findings, published online Sept. 19 in the journal *Child Development*, are based on nationally representative surveys done between 1976 and 2016. Together, they involved over 8 million U.S. kids aged 13 to 19.

Over those years, the study found, teenagers gradually became less likely to try "adult" activities—including drinking, having sex, working, driving, dating and simply going out (with or without their [parents](#)).

By the 2010s, only 55 percent of high school seniors had ever worked for pay—versus roughly three-quarters of their counterparts in the late 1970s through the 1990s.

Similarly, only 63 percent had ever been on a date. That compared with 81 percent to 87 percent of high school seniors in the 1970s through 1990s.

In some findings that will make parents happy, today's kids are often putting off drinking. In the 1970s and 1980s, over 90 percent of high school seniors had ever tried alcohol. That dipped to 81 percent in the 1990s, and dropped further—to 67 percent—by the 2010s.

As for sex, 54 percent of high school students in 1991 said they'd ever had sex. By 2015, that figure stood at 41 percent.

The patterns were seen among kids of all races, family income levels and regions of the country, according to Twenge.

So, what's going on?

The researchers found no evidence that kids are now busier with homework and extracurricular activities—and therefore have little time for jobs, dating or going out.

An obvious question is whether kids' "devices" and online socializing are taking the place of real interaction.

Twenge found that by the early 2010s, [high school seniors](#) were online for an average of 11 hours per week. But, she pointed out, the patterns seen in this study began before widespread internet use—so it's not clear how much of a role technology has played.

Diaz agreed that it's unclear. But, she added, it's obvious that technology is a vital part of how kids socialize. "So they may be spending less time actually socializing, face-to-face," she said.

And then there's the "hovering" parent syndrome.

In recent years, Diaz said, parents have become much more "child-centric," compared with the days when parents would send their kids outside with instructions to be back by dinner.

And while that is well-intended, Diaz said, kids today may have few chances to deal with relationships, work through their own problems—and otherwise "stand on their own two feet."

"On one hand," Diaz said, "today's parents should be commended for sending their kids the right messages about what's appropriate for their age."

But, she added, "sometimes parents want to keep doing everything for their kids."

Diaz suggested that parents ease up on that drive, and give kids the space to develop necessary skills, like time management. She also advised parents to create some "no phone" time every day at home—and to encourage their kids to do the same when they're with their friends.

More information: Jean Twenge, Ph.D., professor, psychology, San Diego State University; Yamalis Diaz, Ph.D., clinical assistant professor, child and adolescent psychiatry, NYU Langone Medical Center, New York City; Sept. 19, 2017, *Child Development*, online

For advice on getting through the teenage years, visit the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

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Citation: Are today's teens putting the brakes on adulthood? (2017, September 19) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-today-teens-adulthood.html>

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